

*Times Colonist (Victoria) Monday, March 10, 2008*

**“No spandex required”** - Byline: Sharie Epp - Column: Iron Matron



What could possibly be as good as chocolate? Well, according to its aficionados, that would be the Nia Technique. My first reaction was, "Let's get real." Lumping exercise and chocolate together, unless it involves sprinting to the post-Valentine's goodie sales, is just wrong.

However unlikely, the idea of sweet and sweat did pique my interest. Since the invitation from Nia instructor Karen Boissonneault happened to include a Valentine's Day session, possibly eliminating the guilt of snacking on a treat later, what the heck.

Nia (officially, neuromuscular integrative action) was created by a couple of California fitness experts in the early 1980s. According to the [www.niac.ca](http://www.niac.ca) website, "Nia is a personal growth, body-mind-spirit fitness program ... that works with the natural wisdom and intelligence of the body, mind, spirit and emotions."

I have to admit phrases like the above tend to make me shudder, never having been enthusiastic about all that touchy/feely stuff. Possibly I'm still harbouring inhibitions from a long-ago creative dance class, where I almost drowned flowing around the room, pretending to be a river.

Still, I love to dance, and it was mainly the dancing part that drew me to one of Karen's classes at Juan de Fuca Recreation Centre. A Nia instructor for three years, she also teaches at Saanich Commonwealth Place and the Ukrainian Catholic Church Hall on Caledonia.

Just turned 50, Karen has a background in ballet and a degree in kinesiology, and has "been there done that," with teaching mainstream fitness. She has also been an Outward Bound instructor, and demonstrated 512 kitchen shows with Pampered Chef, while her kids were young. Nothing ever hooked her like the Nia Technique.

"I always knew I loved to move," Karen said. "The reason I teach Nia is because of the music. It's very married to the music."

"I've been in personal heaven ever since."

About eight people -- one man among them -- were at the Thursday morning class, featuring African drumming to suit the focus on hips and knees. About 52 Nia moves are incorporated into about eight different programs, accompanied by music to match. Each session targets various parts of the body, a bit like having black forest cake for breakfast and chocolate mousse for lunch. That day had the crouching bounce of tribal dancing, and I felt it in my knees and lower back, which brought out a caution by Karen. Nia is not a no-pain-no-gain philosophy.

"Over time, you learn to listen to messages from your body," she said of the all-ages, all-levels program. "You do it your way."

And we did. There was no yelling about sucking in those abs or moving those feet, no gasping for breath. It was just a wide range of easy-to-follow steps, with a touch of creativity thrown in, enhanced by descriptions such as: walking the bones, splashing water into the bowl of your pelvis, spring-loaded knees (sure thing), and yawning armpits (???). We would do a hand-chopping-board karate motion, then immediately soften into dance. I was Mohammed Ali, floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee.

Warm, but not exhausted at the end of the hour, I was a bit weak, which is why I agreed to Karen's suggestion of a second go-round a few days later at the Ukrainian Church. She promised it would be diverse, soothed by the voices of Songs of Sanctuary by Adiemus and the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

Twenty women, again a melting pot of shapes and sizes, zeroed in on shoulders, arms and hands (I'll skip the part about loving our thighs).

Among the friendly group was Cathleen Hart, a registered nurse who works as a clinical researcher for schizophrenia and affective disorders. Cathleen hasn't been embracing thoughts of her impending 60th birthday, but she has wrapped her arms around Nia.

"It's a non-spandex crowd," she said, appreciating the variety and style.

"You can work at your own level of intensity."

For anyone looking for a hard-core workout, Nia is probably not the ticket, and having two left feet might be an issue. Otherwise, it's great.

But as good as chocolate? I just don't know if I can go quite that far. I'm sure, however, I could concede an oatmeal cookie or two.